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Reenactment

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Postscript

Reenactment

Newly single by way of my mother's drowning in the Sound, my father didn't take to bachelorhood as one would expect. There were no nights out with the boys, no sour wisps of perfume clinging to his collar. Instead he got himself a video game console, watched TV shows about food, microwaved leftovers, and drank beer.

Anyway, I'd been looking for an excuse to leave the city. Once home, I had found a typo in my mother's obituary, and after a strongly worded email and an in-person apology, I was offered work as a proofreader for the local circular and occasionally was asked to type up other obituaries, dictated to me from the About-Town Editor.

My first week, I made a typo that went unchecked. The rest of the editorial team took my degree for granted, so while they scrutinized other writers' work, mine went unchecked with the assumption that I'd scrutinize myself. But I didn't, and with one wrong keystroke, I changed a person's livelihood. Once a farmer, now a framer. The irony was not lost on me.

Worst of all was how disappointed everyone was that I let the typo slip.

In one of our first therapy sessions, Laurie told me that the key to moving back home and not losing your mind was to make routines for yourself outside of the house and work. So I got up an extra half hour each morning and breakfasted at the diner on Third and Main. "Who died this week?" was second to weather over bacon-and-eggs conversation.

Laurie also suggested I find a hobby that Dad and I could do together, so on the weekends we'd take trips to Beers of the World for the craft-your-own packs and to ogle the labels. We'd peruse the aisles, calling to each other from different corners of the store, tripping over our nasal-forward accents to

pronounce the foreign names. We weren't planning on going to Belgium any time soon, but dammit, we'd learn how to properly say *Brouwerij Westvleteren*. Ultimately, we'd pick the ones with the highest ABV, regardless of region or ratings or hop profile. "Same price, gets ya drunker," Dad would say.

Fortunately, I'd found an additional hobby. A young man by the name of Gabriel approached me at the drug store last month where I was waiting in line for a refill, and he was picking up a birthday card for an aunt. Gabriel and I had gone to the same high school, but hadn't been friends. I would have been fine with a cursory smile and nod, but he came over and started a conversation. I, of course, lied and told him the pills were for my dad who was having a rough time of it all.

"I didn't know what you wanted, so I didn't fix you anything," Gabriel said, upon opening his front door. Thus commenced our third date. He stood there in his socks and khakis, swirling a half-filled rocks glass. I couldn't tell if I was supposed to laugh or not, so instead I concerned myself with unraveling, one icy layer at a time. I set my coat, scarf, hat, and gloves in a neat, soggy pile on a table in the foyer while Gabriel sealed us into his parents' house.

By the time I'd taken my boots off and toed into the kitchen, careful to avoid melting ice patches, Gabriel was tossing back and chomping on the ice that had shrunk in his glass. Little bits of water sprayed from his lips, soaking into and speckling his shirt. Hearing people chew ice gave me the shivers, but I was running low on people that year, so I was willing to overlook it.

Our last two dates had been dinner and movies. It had all been low stakes, each date ending in the car after he drove me home. A kiss goodnight, and once, a more intense kiss goodnight, but nothing more. I'd never even been inside his house before, but it unfolded before me as I imagined it would. A one-story ranch, lowish ceilings, a leather sectional facing a midsize flatscreen. My own parents' house not five miles away was not dissimilar, and so even though Gabriel looked like an overgrown child as he walked through the hallways pointing out his middle school class pictures still hanging on the wall, I couldn't judge.

"My parents are in Boca Raton for the weekend visiting my Nana," Gabe said, gesturing to the master bedroom which happened to be directly across a narrow hallway from his own bedroom into which I had not yet been invited.

"Mine too," I said.

"Whoa, really?"

"No, my dad is at home watching the Food Network."

"Oh. Right, and your mom died. I mean, passed away. I mean, I'm sorry."

"Right. She left me her car."

“Well, anyway, I didn’t mean that as a pick-up line, about my parents being away and all. I was actually thinking we could go out and do something.”

Through the sliding glass door to his backyard, I could see that it had started snowing again and a new dusting was just about covering up the now-dirtied hardened icy layer that had fallen a few days ago. A small pile had been pushed up against the glass, and I could see the cross section of the past week’s accumulations, the layers getting progressively denser and grayer toward the bottom. The thought of going out again was exhausting. I actually wouldn’t have minded if he had been trying to pick me up. I was sort of hoping to get felt up on his twin bed.

“Maybe a drink first,” I said, and he went about it.

I had tried the city living thing for a bit after graduation, like everyone else around here did. It didn’t take long to realize it wasn’t for me. Every single day I lived in the City, I wondered how everyone else was making it work, how they weren’t falling apart at the seams. Sometimes, when waiting for the subway, I’d ask strangers, “How can you live here?” And they’d mumble a thin platitude that one would say to strangers about how it was the greatest city on earth, but I would clarify that I actually wanted to know. What were the specific ways in which they were able to live day after day in this place and not crumble? I had a similar question about the subway itself under the sheer weight of the buildings. And then my mom drowned herself in the Long Island Sound, and so I had something else to ask questions about.

But Gabriel assumed I moved back home because of money, so I let him think that. The mother thing was an unfortunate coincidence.

Most of what I liked about Gabriel was that he was a Long Island boy through and through, bona fide, and it was refreshing to be around someone who was actually proud of being from our neck. It had never occurred to him to move to the City. Rather than merely falling into a job, he had gone through an extensive interview and training process to work as a tour guide/character actor at Sagamore Hill, Teddy Roosevelt’s vacation mansion-turned-historic site, which I’d never even heard of until meeting Gabriel.

There was something a little sad but fascinating about witnessing someone working their dream job. What comes next?

Halfway through my drink—a brown liquor with a splash of club soda, of which Gabriel was overly proud—I finally got him to open his bedroom door to me. It was tiny and perfect. A twin bed rested up against the far wall and textbooks unsoldback from college courses crowded a singular shelf. A framed replica of the Constitution, a ticket stub from the Liberty Bell,

a smattering of photos of him in-costume thumbtacked to a corkboard. A corncob pipe collected dust on a bedside table. He produced a round coaster made of cork out of some drawer and set it on his dresser. I took the cue and put my drink on it, and then he took me in his arms.

My hair fell over my shoulders and onto his, down his back. I needed a haircut badly, but that wasn't a step I was ready to take yet. There was only one good hair salon in town and the thought of going there, the thought of everyone asking, "how are you? and "how are you managing?" I hadn't discussed this with Laurie yet.

"The Teddy House," he whispered in my ear while my tongue was on his neck stubble. I pulled my tongue back in and felt his flavor around my mouth. A little salty with a chemical tang, a fine wine gone rancid.

"What about it?" I sat back and looked at his face, which was the face of a person trying to suppress an erection.

"Well, do you maybe want to go there?" He squeezed my leg.

"Now? Isn't it closed?"

"Technically, yes, but I'm on the opening shift tomorrow so they gave me a set of keys." He jammed his hand into his pocket and presented a set of small silver keys.

"I figured they'd look more old-fashioned," I said, grabbing them. They were warm and smelled of iron.

"Come on, it'll be fun," he said. "It'll be quiet, we can be alone."

"We're alone now," I said, reciprocating the leg squeeze.

He sighed as if fed up with me, as if I was the one being a nuisance and asking him to go out in the snow and trespass.

"I just don't think I can be with someone who's never been there."

I drove. I'd only been allowed to finish half my drink anyway.

"We're going to have to walk a bit," Gabriel said once we parked.

I asked him if there was a chance we could get arrested.

He waved me off. "Hope your shoes are waterproof."

"They're not," I said.

"It's not too far. Most of it's sidewalk anyway."

"Snow-covered sidewalk," I said. "You might have to carry me."

But he had already started off.

"So, where is this place?" I asked. The ends of my hair were beginning to freeze and we still hadn't gotten to the house.

"Right there," he said, motioning to a big brown house a ways away. He made a crude picture frame with thumbs and forefingers.

"Wow," I said, trying to sound impressed. "Neat."

"When it's not covered in snow, you can see there are hills that go back for miles," he said. "It's best in fall, but it's nice now too."

When we finally made it to the porch, Gabriel pressed his nose against a window creating twin clouds of flickering fog beneath his nostrils. Stacks of primary colored books, framed black and white pictures and documents, and woolen blankets draped over big wooden furniture.

"So this is where you work," I said.

"It's basically my second home."

"Wow," I said.

"Do you love it?"

"Sure."

"Let's go in."

We went in. It wasn't much warmer inside than out. Gabriel insisted I take my shoes off. Again, I had to hop away from melting snow.

He turned on half the lights and started pointing to and describing things. He pointed to and described things with such fervor that his face flushed and beads of sweat crowded on his upper lip. I tried to muster enthusiasm, but it soon became clear that I was in fact trying.

"You hate it."

"No! No, it's awesome. I'm just tired, and it's cold. I think I'd like it more if I got the full experience, during the day, with other people here, with you in costume. I'd love to see you in costume."

"There's an upstairs."

"Show me the upstairs."

I followed him upstairs and a thought rushed into my head—a very loud thought—that maybe this was not actually Roosevelt's house. Maybe this was the land where he had vacationed, the general area, but this was definitely not the house. The stairs didn't creak. It was a cheap replica, the souvenir version. My mother had worked in flooring. I knew stairs.

After some more pointing and describing, we reached a bedroom door.

"This is my room," he said.

"Like your dressing room? Where you get in costume?"

"Sort of."

He switched on a lamp that was fashioned to look old, but had an energy-saver bulb. The room was set up exactly the same as his bedroom in his actual house. The bed was against the far wall and there was a single bookshelf. Even the color scheme was similar.

He walked in and sat on the bed, pat-patting where he wanted me to sit beside him.

"I don't think so."

"You hate it."

"Do you actually sleep here?"

"Sometimes."

"Do your parents know about this?"

"I do it when they're in Boca Raton. We could stay here tonight. Like a vacation. There's room enough for both of us."

"Does your boss know you do this?"

"I can put my costume on if that'll turn you on."

"I think we should probably get going," I said. "I have a big assignment at work due tomorrow. A lot of people died today."

"How do you know that?"

"I mean, probably."

"What does it matter to you? You told me you don't even care about your job. This is my whole life," he said, turning toward a dusty window. He spread his arms and rested his hands on the window's molding. I still couldn't read him. Was this meant to be ironically dramatic? Was I supposed to be impressed with this performance?

His frame was silhouetted, not because there were any lights on the property, but because the snow, which had been falling in flakes when we got there, now seemed to be falling in a solid frosty sheet.

"You wanted to get to know me so bad," he said. "You wanted to suck on my neck."

"I still want to suck on your neck, but I'd much rather do it in your actual house or my actual house, and not this museum."

"This isn't a *museum*, it's Teddy's *house*. It's a historical landmark."

"When was this house built?"

"Sketches began in 1884 by architects Lamb and Rich."

"But the stairs! They don't creak!"

All old staircases had a creak, it was fact. People pay to get rid of the creak.

Then, a screech so loud that it pierced our argument, so loud that it came from outside but felt close. Personal.

I pulled my knees to my chest, as if whatever had just made that sound might bite my ankles. I quickly unfurled, though. I didn't want to be on the bed either.

"What was that?" I said.

"Probably some sort of animal," Gabriel said, unmoved. "Happens all the time."

"It sounds like some sort of animal *being tortured*," I said, as calmly as one could. "Do you maybe want to get the hell out of here now?"

"You don't like it here," he said. "This is my home, and you hate it."

"No, I do like it. I just think I might get more out of it if I came when it was open, during the day, when I can actually see where the hell I am. And I can't believe you are blind enough to accept what you are saying from a script. Sure, it's a good show for visitors but you can't actually believe all of this."

I got up to leave but he grabbed my wrist. I yanked free and bounded down the stairs.

Another set of yelps echoed through the grounds. Each scream changed in pitch and tone, becoming more desperate and guttural with each bleat.

I reached the front door before he did, but was unfamiliar with the lock, so he caught up to me.

"Why are you running away from me? Here," he presented his neck to me. "Suck on it. I'm sorry. Please."

I opened my mouth with the pretense of licking, but then bit down hard, which preoccupied Gabriel long enough, screaming and writhing, for me to find the lock.

"You're so fucking typical," he yelled after me. His eyes were glassy and unfocused. "You don't even care about the Island. This is our Island. Teddy is *our* president. This is my home."

I charged out into the snow. I slipped a little bit, but kept going. I could see my mother's car in the distance.

"Do you realize how much history is on this island?" he shouted. He came after me, also slipping, but fast enough that he was gaining on me. "You probably have no idea, do you? Did you know that my grandfather was born and raised here? And his grandfather? And his grandfather?"

In other circumstances I would have tried to figure out the dates and compare them to the little history I knew about the Island, but this was no time for numbers. Gabriel had distracted me enough that I stumbled right into a fire hydrant, bashed my knee, and fell into a snow bank.

He was no more than ten feet from me now, and while he could have easily caught up to me, he stayed where he was, crouched, and mimed pulling an assault rifle from his back pocket. He swung his arms around, closed one eye, and aimed at me.

A maelstrom of snow and animal noises swirled up behind me. My feet and fingertips were almost completely numb and I could feel my knee locking up, but I pressed on.

When I finally reached the parking lot, animal prints were pressed in the snow over the windshield, roof, and back window as if by cookie cutter. I got inside, locked the doors, and blasted the heat. I realized I'd left the snowbrush in the trunk and there was no way the measly wipers were going to be able to tackle the mess. I stayed in park for twenty seconds, trying to steady my breath. Then I remembered we took one car.

A set of human hands pressed themselves against the driver's side window, clawing at the ice and snow. He tried to open my door, grunting and tugging at the handle, but I kept it locked. I reversed, hoping he'd get the picture and stand back. I revved my windshield wipers, said to hell with the back window, and yelled, "Stand back."

I reversed and heard him scream, "My toe!"

I drove a ways away from him, left him doubled over in the snow, and rolled down my window.

"Is it broken?" I yelled.

"Fuck you," he said.

"Fuck me? Fuck you! What's your problem?"

"Let me in."

"Why should I?" I drove to the other end of the parking lot, but close enough that we could still hear each other talk.

"We both know you're not going to let me freeze to death."

Gabriel limped over to a bench and sat down in a pile of snow.

"You don't know me," I said, sounding a touch petulant, but the moment called for it.

"You broke my fucking toe. The least you can do is drive me home. I promise I won't talk about Teddy."

Gabriel stood up, limped a little, and then walked around and got in.

"Guess your toe isn't broken after all," I said.

"Still hurts a lot," he said.

We drove in silence. Just as I reached to turn on the radio, he grabbed my hand. "Listen, my head's not right."

"Mmhm," I said.

"Seriously, I should have told you before. I'm on like, a ton of meds."

"What kind of meds?"

"A ton," he said. "But anyway, I think that our generation has a problem with living in the moment."

"You're a historical reenactor," I said. "You live in the past for a living."

"Huh," he said, as if this had never entered his mind before. "I never thought of it that way."

I drove him to his house and our date ended in the driveway, like the others. He leaned in for a kiss but I turned away, and when he tried to explain and apologize again, I unbuckled his seatbelt for him and shoved him out the door. I didn't wait to see him go inside. I sped away, skidding on wet snow.

When I got home, I heard my dad playing video games in the basement. I changed out of my damp clothes, curled up on the couch, too wired to go to

bed, and switched on the TV. It didn't matter what was on. Dad came upstairs twenty minutes later.

"How was your night?" I asked.

"Fine. Working dinner with some clients," he said. "How was your date?"

"Fine."

"Is he a nice guy at least?"

"Hard to say."

"Will I meet him? What's his name?"

"Probably not. It's Teddy."

"Like Roosevelt? Is he a weirdo?"

"No one says weirdo anymore."

"Well I'd like to meet this Teddy if he's taking you out again."

"Maybe next weekend," I said. My phone buzzed. It was Gabriel. I pressed ignore.

Dad sat on the opposite end of the couch, the two of us in our new positions. I'd begun to forget how or where Mom used to sit. In the middle? Legs tucked under?

"She liked to sit sandwiched between those two cushions," Dad said, pointing the remote control at the two cushions that always cleaved.

He fell asleep before the first commercial, stiff-jawed with his eyes shut into tight little slits, as if when entering sleep mode he turned to stone. I shifted my legs around to dip my feet into the space where my mother used to sit and wriggled my toes underneath a cushion. I rooted around for clues to see if she'd dropped or hidden anything, but there was nothing except lint.

I shifted my whole body into the space feeling small and swaddled with the cushions exerting their slight pressure on my sides. But the couch bed was scratchy and stiff at best. Why did she sit here when there were perfectly good cushions to sit on the right way? It occurred to me that I'd never asked.